

Narrator: Archie Chassion & Nick Matherne
Interviewer: Jennifer Abraham Cramer
Transcriber: Joshua Coen

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JENNIFER ABRAHAM CRAMER: Okay. Today is November 14th November, the year 2013 and this is Jennifer Abraham Cramer with the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral Histories LSU Libraries special collections and I'm also here with CWPPRA folks, though they have stepped out of the room right now to go get food. Um, but we are here interviewing Archie Chaisson...Did I say that right? Close enough anyway...and Nick Matherne and I'm just gonna start with some basic easy questions and I'm gonna get a little bit closer to you so we can have some good audio quality. Um, okay. So will you each state your full name?

ARCHIE CHAISSON: [00:39] Archie Chaisson.

CRAMER: Okay and...you?

NICK MATHERNE: [00:43] Nick Matherne.

CRAMER: I guess that's really only, you know, applicable when woman have maiden names...that question is. Okay, so. Um, when and where were you born?

CHAISSON: I was born July 1985 in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

CRAMER: Oh, okay. And that's Archie talking right now. And Nick, where were you born?

MATHERNE: I was born on April 10, 1983 in Galliano.

CRAMER: Okay. Alright. And Nick you were raised here in Louisiana?

MATHERNE: [01:12] I was, yes. Born and raised in Larose. We did move away for short periods of time. My dad got transferred to Nashville for a year and then Charlotte for a year, but we came back down here both times. My mom was from Bayou Lafourche. My dad was originally from Des Almonds. And we grew up on the bayou, you know, fishing. Took a bayou life.

CRAMER: And where did you grow up?

CHAISSON: I actually spent about 6 months at Colorado Springs. My father was still in the army at the time. My mom and dad are both from Bayou Lafourche. One grew up in Thibodeaux. One grew up in Houma 'round the Montague area. But we moved back down here to Lockport when I was about six months old and I've been there ever since and have never left.

CRAMER: And that was Archie by the way. Okay, so if both of you could just share with us a childhood memory that connects you to Louisiana's wetlands and coastal...

MATHERNE: [02:10] Every year, we made a habit of taking a camping trip down to Fouchon Beach, when you could get on Fouchon Beach back then, cause there was enough beach to get on to. And that was always a great memory of, you know, fishing and playing on the beach and running the crab line and boiling crabs right there on the beach. And then, of course, driving back going over the Leeville bridge, you know...over the years, watching all that land slowly...or quickly rather, disappear. And, uh, you know it's interesting now talking to people in our line of work with a few more years of experience than we have, who talk about the land loss since they were kids. And comparing that to...you know, I'm only 30 years old...so the land loss since I was a kid...I feel like it's much more significant now that people of our generation can notice that significant land loss.

CRAMER: And what about you Archie?

CHAISSON: Yeah, I grew up in a little bit different of a family. He grew up south of the intercoastal waterway, so as a "Sport de Lockport"...and hopefully the people listening to this will realize what that is...we didn't travel down to Fouchon beach that much but since my dad and our family was originally from the Montague, Pont Au Chien area, we spent a lot of time out down there, doing a lot of the same things...fishing out of the boat, catching specks and reds, and running some crab traps, and then going back home and boiling those to eat. So that's a similar deal, you know, talking to people. I'm only 28. Nick's only a few years older than I am. But watching...and still fishing in that same area...watching the land loss and looking at a GPS and having it marked from 1998 in a little island where I used to fish and as we've seen

hurricanes, as we've seen salt water intrusion, as we've seen subsidence, you see that little island slowly shrink to where now it's just a little PVC pipe in the ground. So that's, you know a very...so that's traumatic to a person who's been here that long but it shows the evidence that we're actually losing our coast.

CRAMER: And isn't in Leesville, isn't there a cemetery or wasn't there a cemetery...

CHAISSON: [04:13] We were talking about that during the meeting. Back in 2011 and 2012, we did about 6 or 7 news stories. CNN came down, Fox 8, Channel 6, Channel 4, and talked about... it started with a Halloween interview with a Fox 8 reporter doing the spooky graveyard story and it morphed into coastal land loss and what is has done and watching basically people's family members get wash into the Gulf of Mexico. Kind of tragic.

CRAMER: And very visible. I mean, you just watch it happen.

CHAISSON: Very visible. You can see it as you drive across the Leesville bridge that new span they built. If you look over the shoulder, you can see the two little tombs that are left and the cross sticking up. And if you get there in the boat, you not driving. You'll hit an old concrete tomb with your prop so it's very visible.

CRAMER: So, um, this is a basic question we've been asking everybody and everybody, believe it or not, has a really unique answer so we'll ask it to you too. If you were to have to speak to anyone in a very basic way about why Louisiana's wetlands are important to not

only Louisiana but also the rest of the nation, what would you say to them? Okay, we'll start with you Nick.

MATHERNE: [05:23] Two main things: Oil and gas and seafood. Obviously a fifth of the nation's oil and gas comes through port Fourchon, the port of Terrebonne largely supports a lot of oil and gas activity that happens off shore and then seafood. Louisiana is I believe the only state in the country that distributes seafood to at least the other 48...obviously Alaska has their own seafood industry. Hawaii too...but in the contiguous 48, Louisiana exports seafood to every other state. And that's all a product of the estuary. So, uh, if we write ourselves off that way we're gonna be depending on foreign sources of seafood.

CRAMER: And we all know how bad Chinese crawfish tastes, right? That's what I think anyway.

CHAISSON: My answer would be people. You know, we've done a lot of cultural things to kind of keep the language alive. Nick and I can probably hold a decent conversation in French. Well Nick might not be able to.

MATHERNE: I can know when my mom's talking about me, but that's about it.

CHAISSON: But, you know, the vast majority of people our age don't have the grandparents left to teach them that anymore, so you know not only is the land washing away and we're losing the estuary for the seafood...we're opening up more spots for oil and gas,

which is good, cause its open water now and you can just plop a barge there and drill a hole...but you know at the same time we're losing our heritage. We don't have the people shrimping or crabbing or trapping and much less spreading the uniqueness of the Cajun heritage and the language around it.

MATHERNE: [07:02] That's very true. My great grandmother on my mom's side didn't speak a word of English. She only spoke French. And I doubt that our kids, you know...well maybe Archie's kids, cause he's gonna force them to speak French...Our kids generation is completely losing that.

CHAISSON: And it's amazing, cause you see, and I don't know if Nick does but I have my in-laws...my wife's originally from another state so when you travel there for holidays...and with the wonderful world of Facebook these days, when you post pictures...Nick and I do a lot of flying for our jobs to look at coastal projects and the land loss and document that and I post those pictures sometimes in a real bad area as a poster child of why the rest of the country needs to pay attention to why we're losing this land and to see their faces when you talk about that for holidays and when you go home...you have to try tell them what you do for a living, because an old cattleman from Texas isn't going to understand that. It brings to light why and who we are.

CRAMER: I really like what you're saying about the culture and how it's connected to the land and some of the people that we've interviewed have said that they are telling their kids that they may not be able to stick around here.

CHAISSON: [08:11] And that's very true. I think the national politics has dictated I-10 as the line and if you're below I-10 than you're gonna pay higher flood insurance. You're gonna pay higher home owners insurance. And we have a great economy down here. Both parishes have huge ports that provide services to the deport oil and gas and that's kept a lot of jobs here but if that goes away because we don't have the infrastructure in place to protect it than you gonna see that migration further north and we're gonna lose even more of who we are.

MATHERNE: Well, and it seems... it's unfortunate because it seems like the rest of the country isn't jumping on board and realizing the assets that we have here until it's too late. You look at a situation like Hurricane Katrina, shutting down Venice, shutting down Fouchon, shutting down port of Terrebonne, and gas prices spike, what, a dollar a gallon? And people are wondering well, why is this happening? Is Louisiana really that vital of a place for all of this? And, you know, at the time people realize oh this is an issue. We do need to do something about it. But time passes and people in New York and Iowa have insurance issues of their own and start falling into their own lives and forgetting about Louisiana. And you know like Archie mentioned earlier, it's difficult to get a cattleman from Texas to really understand what's going on here. It's difficult to get a banker from Thibodeaux or Shrever to understand what's going on in the coast. Your lower residents down in Pont Aux Chenes, Cocodrie, Fouchon, Grand Isle,

Leesville, they understand because they walk out of the doors and literally see it every day. Uh, people who live in the higher areas... Archie and I live in higher areas just where we are in the middle of Lafourche Parish... and uh so the further north you get, even within parishes that have coastlines, people just completely lose sight of the day-to-day danger that we face.

CRAMER: So... In your opinion, what do we stand to lose without coastal restoration projects? Do you want to start, Nick?

MATHERNE: Um, everything. It's just wondering what goes first. Obviously the culture. We're fighting for a marsh creation project down near Isle Dejean Charles which is a historical Native American community. Uh, that island used to have about 80 families on it and now down to about 23. Just every storm that comes in kicks another family or two out. They're just not seeing the benefit of fighting it out another year. So that's a real life tragedy that we're able to follow unfortunately and I think it's a good testament to what could potentially happen across the rest of the coast if we don't have the programs that we have and if we don't implement the projects that we have the opportunity to implement.

CRAMER: So when you say fighting for projects, what do you mean?

MATHERNE: [11:07] Uh, there's very little funding. There is almost limitless opportunities of what we can do with very limited funding. Between Lafourche and Terrebonne,

we could easily spend a couple billion a year doing restoration and we're fighting over a couple million and we just don't have the resources to do what we need to do in the short term.

CRAMER: And Archie.

CHAISSON: [11:31] And I think Nick's right. You know, we stand to lose everything we have. We spend a lot of time in parish government outside of looking at coastal projects talking about taxes for new jails, new schools, animal shelters, new public facilities...but until we turn the tide and we quit worrying about, or spending all of our time worrying about that infrastructure and start to look at raising money to do stuff outside of levee systems. If we lose our levee system in Golden Meadow because we lose every bit of land around it, we're gonna lose an entire community. Six schools, um, a few hundred billion dollars' worth of investment in Port Fourchon, so it's these little things like that that we stand to lose if we don't do something about it in the near term.

CRAMER: And so, this is usually when you come in with a question before I ask the final question. Do you have any questions for them Susan?

SUSAN TESTROET-BERGERON: You are probably the youngest people that we've talked to today.

MATHERNE: Why thank you.

BERGERON: [12:26] You're welcome. So, thinking about this from a younger person's perspective, what do you think we need to do to change so we have a better commitment for coastal restoration?

CRAMER: Archie.

CHAISSON: I think that you have to stem...I think that Nick and I grew up in similar families, um, and I think until we get people our age and people younger than us interested in this sort of thing, we're not going to see anything done. You're not gonna see, um, the Connoco Phillips of the world and the guys who run these oil companies who care about this sort of thing last much longer, because the people coming up behind them aren't as interested in it. I can remember when I was at Nicholls, involved with the student government association, we put on the first ever Wetlands forum while we were there back in 2004, 2005. And we probably had 50 people show up to that night. We had Dr. Earl Melancon from Nicholls come in, Randy Martell who manages Clover Lake down in Lafourche Parish. And 90% of the people who were there were just average Joes from the community who were probably in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. We had two people from the college age of Nicholls show up and that was the 2 of us that were there from SGA. So I think until we can get people our age and younger to focus on that and quite worry about the rest of the things of the world so much...Get off of Facebook and get in a boat. Get off of your Xbox and get in a boat...and see what's outside. You know, some of the schools in Lafourche have started to do these bus trips where they take the kids down to Fouchon. And you'd be surprised not only the reaction from the kids on the bus when you cross the Leesville bridge, but also the reaction from the teachers because the newer teachers that are there now

have not ever seen that sort of thing, especially if they're from outside of the tenth ward of the parish.

MATHERNE: [14:31] I think it is just to, you know, make people aware of it because, again if people in Iowa are wrapped up in their own problems, people in Larose, Lockport are wrapped up in our own problems. And it seems like it's a generational thing but also a northward trend. Recently I had my ten year class reunion. I went to Archie's also. My wife graduated with Archie. And, uh, a much larger percentage of their class in central Lafourche, their high school in the central part of Lafourche parish, they actually stayed. You know, more people were still around the area. They hadn't moved away. An overwhelming percentage of my classmates from South Lafourche in Galliano in the lower part of the parish had to come from out of town, out of state. Some people couldn't come because they were living in New York or Washington D.C. You know, just...everyone who experiences it more daily is starting, you know the younger generation is starting to wonder why even bother? It's to, like Archie said, get in the boat and see just why you should bother. Because it's not just the trawlers or the oil field workers that have to worry about the land loss. It's all of us, because this is a problem much bigger than any individual.

BERGERON: I have one other question. There's a huge sense of community in Lafourche Parish. And I think part of it is how we live in the wetlands and how we interact. So, how do we transfer that sense of community to other people throughout the nation so they can understand what makes us so different?

MATHERNE: [16:33] If you can solve that, than I think America would be a much better country. You know, I think...I'm sitting here holding my cell phone...I think the smart phone generation is kind of ruining that aspect because we wanna know things now and then everything has an instant gratification to it. And there is anything but instant gratification in coastal restoration. It takes such a long time to get projects engineered and designed and then funded for construction. And then they get them on the ground and then when a storm comes in and wipes out your work, you're wondering, well geez are we spinning our wheels here? And so you start looking to larger diversion projects and you start to think well man, if we're not gonna see land built built for another 50-100 years, is it really worth it? Again, because we have that instant gratification mentality. I'm probably getting totally off topic there. I just rambled.

CRAMER: That was a very unique point. And that was Nick by the way. Archie, what do you think?

CHAISSON: You know, and I think we talked about this earlier when you were out the room, not only do we lose the land but we lose our culture. You know, when I was a kid, on Sunday afternoon, you used to get in the truck and you used to go to your mamma's house and your papa's house and you used to go make the veillie. People don't do that anymore. You know, even my own cousins. We don't get to together but probably Thanksgiving and Christmas anymore, when we used to see each just about every Sunday cause mama would cook a gumbo or a stew and we would sit around a table. And I think if you could make the rest of the country see what that does to a family and how it brings you together and how it brings a community

together, you will see why in Terrebonne and Lafourche and some of the other coastal communities, when you leave, you don't really leave. You move out the house, but you move down the street or you move to the next the subdivision. You know, I grew up in the subdivision next door to where I live now. My in-laws live fifteen houses down the street. People 'round here don't tend not to move more than, what, twenty, twenty five miles to where they grew up. And I think that's a good thing cause you capture that family. You have to leave for work, that's a good thing. You know, we encourage people to move where opportunities take them, but you lose that sense of community sometimes.

MATHERNE: Now Archie, can you spell veuillez for the rest of them?

BERGERON: You need to tell people what "make the veuillez" is.

CHAISSON: [19:00] Well I called myself a "Sport De Lockport" earlier so we gonna have to figure out what that is too. You know, making the veuillez was when you'd go to your grandma's house on Sunday around the kitchen table and everybody would just talk. You'd tell the stories, you'd hear your grandparents talk about walkin' the 50 miles in the snow to get to school, and the things they'd used to do. The kids would chit chat around the little kiddie table as we would call it and then we would go outside and we would play. But you did that. And you were there from, you know, normally on a Sunday after church at 11 o'clock until about 1 o'clock when the coffee ran out. And you made the veuillez on it. Played cards, play Pedro.

MATHERNE: And it's definitely true. We used do the same thing with my grandparents. Every Sunday granny would cook something and you didn't care what it was cause it was gonna be delicious. And you had all your cousins there and we all grew up with our cousins. You know, we were all within a few years of each other and, you know, now I look at my own family. I've got three kids who don't have any cousins yet. We're hoping. But we've definitely lost that sense of community and I think our advances in technology...you know, obviously society's gonna keep turning and the industrial wheel's gonna keep rolling, but...you know, my grandmother now talks to one of my cousins who lives in Little Rock Arkansas, through Skype. And you know our grandparents, the completely computer-phobic generation, is now embracing it because that's where the grandkids are. They're on Facebook. They're on Skype. And it is hard to keep that sense of community when the younger generations are embracing that fact that hey, I don't have to stay in one place. I can look all across the country, instead of just ten miles from my home to find work. And so that's just one more challenge that we have to overcome.

CRAMER: So one last question for each of you, unless Susan has another question...Is how did each of you get involved in coastal restoration? Starting with Nick.

MATHERNE: [21:03] I blame Windell Curole of the South Lafourche Levee District. Nah, honestly...after college, just looking around for work, and there was a coastal zone management job with Lafourche Parish government available. My brother was the director of the parks and recreation department for Lafourche Parish government. He loved working for the

government. And so I said well, let me get my foot in the door and see where this can go. And Windell Curole of the South Lafourche Levee District was the interim coastal zone management administrator for the parish government at the time. And I had known Windell here and there because of my brother's involvement with government so I ended up getting the job. Within three months, President Charlie Randolph bumped me up to the department head position. A couple years later, a position opened up in Terrebonne Parish and that's where I am now. And I don't have a background in science or in any sort of biology or engineering, but you get addicted to coastal restoration. You can't help but be immersed in the culture when you go down to a place like Isle De Jean Charles and you start listening to the residents there talk about...you know...you hear Father Rocknockin say how they used to be able to go and trap within a couple miles of Isle De Jeans Charles, where now immediately on the outside, you have water. So, uh, it tugs at your heart to where you wanna stay involved and you wanna see stuff happen. And when you finally do get that first project completed on the ground and you see, look we've built land, it's pretty emotional.

CRAMER: Thank you. What about you Archie?

CHAISSON: [23:01] When I was in college, it kind of peaked my interest, and I actually started chasing after a young lady who was Randy's daughter...um, and if anybody know's Randy Martell he is very involved in a lot of the coastal issues in both Lafourche and in South West Louisiana...and while dating his daughter got conned into doing some marsh grass plannings and some things out in the marsh. And then eventually married his daughter. But after I graduated from college, I kinda parlayed crawling around in the mud to get an interview with

an engineering firm down in Cut-Off and started doing some coastal permitting and stuff for them. I actually worked with Nick when he was the director over at Lafourche and actually built a couple of projects. And Nick's right. Once you put fifty acres of dirt where there was water before, it kinda gets in your blood. And when Nick left Terrebonne Parish...I used to joke with him all of the time that I'd do anything for his job cause he got to play around all day; he worked for the government, you know? He got to ride in a boat. He got to go do this. He got to go do that...and I'll never forget when he got the job at Terrebonne, when he told Charlotte he was leaving, he knocked on my door one day and said "hey, you always wanted my job. Now's your chance." And sure enough, he got me in touch with President Randolph and a few months later I took over at the CZM administrator for Lafourche. And I did that for about a two year span and just took a job as Parish administrator, but I still handle the coastal office and a lot of the overarching coastal projects. It's been a long journey to get there but it convoluted. But I got a wife and a baby out of the deal too so I can't complain.

BERGERON: I'd like to say something before we close the interview. Um, you guys are my generation's best hope for what we're gonna do next.

CHAISSON: Oh lord!

BERGERON: You're young enough to be my child, you know? So, a lot sits on your shoulders. So it's exciting to see your enthusiasm and your commitment and anything CWPPRA can...well, I shouldn't say that, but...we're very excited to see young people...

MATHERNE: [25:15] As long as you don't call us the next Windell Curole and Reggie Dupre, we'll do our best.

CHAISSON: Someone called us the next Windell and Kerry St. Pe and we were joking which one was gonna have to be who.

CRAMER: Well is there anything that y'all would like to add before we close it?

CHAISSON: Thanks for doing this. I think this is a great project and it's gonna preserve some things for our kids and our grandkids to come back and say "Hey, look. There's my daddy. He did something with his life."

CRAMER: Thank y'all so much. We really appreciate it. It was a great interview.

[Tape Ends 25:53]